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And Finally . . .

A Comet, Or a Tiger, Or ...?

Michael Simonson

James J. Duderstadt, president emeritus of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, opened the 2004 Educause conference in Denver by saying the future of colleges and universities was more than uncertain in the digital age—it might be downright threatened. He went on to quote business guru Peter Drucker as saying that campuses will be “relics” in 30 years. Duderstadt also quoted Frank H. T. Rhodes, president emeritus of Cornell University as having said that colleges in the digital age are like dinosaurs looking up at the incoming comet (Carlson, 2004, p. A34)

Duderstadt is quoted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* as say-



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ing that: “Faculty members have not kept up.” “Xbox gaming consoles have more processing power than most faculty have ever seen in their lifetime.... [T]echnology is like a tiger, chasing down institutions.... The sense is that we are on the edge of another great change in higher education, except this time it’s global.” And “[w]ill the university as we know it now exist a generation from now?”

To be sure, emeritus presidents of universities have an interesting role to play in academe. They no longer possess the incredible power they wielded as president, yet they are sometimes revered for their insights and experiences. They certainly make interesting keynote speakers, at least at Educause.

What is less clear is how the emeritus president, or anyone for that matter, can divine the future. It is one thing to claim the demise of any institution in “30 years,” especially when it is likely the person making the prediction will not be around that long. Certainly, it would be easy to criticize those who foretell the “eve of destruction” of universities—venerable institutions that have withstood the changes of centuries of new ideas and innovations.

Normally, we in the field of distance education would not pay too much attention to these prophecies, as most often they are meant to capture the attention of often-distracted conference attendees.

However, because distance education is being referred to as the *comet* bearing down on the dinosaurs, and the *tiger* chasing down institutions, those in our field have a right to pay close attention—even to feel a little upset.

It is obvious that many do not really understand the potential of distance education. Sure, the infusion of communications technologies will be critical to changes in education and training at all levels, even in universities. Just as certain, at least to this editor, is the unending importance of good ideas, instructional content, and quality teaching. Instruction using technologies to reach students distant in location and time is exciting and promising. Just as certain, teachers, teaching, and important ideas will remain the most basic component of education, especially distance education.

And finally, next time you hear someone say that distance education is going to change the future, and that distance education is bringing the apocalypse, ask them how they know. Their answer might be interesting—but probably not.

REFERENCE

Carlson, S. (2004, October 29). Technology threatens colleges with extinction, ex-president warns. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. A34.